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SUBJECT: PANAMA: NEW AERO-MARITIME SERVICE DIRECTOR MAKES  
THE RIGHT NOISES

REF: 08 PANAMA 00725

Classified By: Ambassador Barbara J. Stephenson for reasons 1.4 (b) and  
(d)

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Summary  
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11. (S//NF) "Something is going on," Rigoberto Gordon, Director of the National Aero-Naval Service (SENAN), told EMBOFFs December 5, referring to apparent corruption among former National Maritime Service (SMN) members now in SENAN's ranks. (Note: SENAN, formed on December 22, combines the perviously independent SMN and the National Air Service (SAN) into one civilian service to fill a coast guard-like role. End Note) He said the situation was worse than he expected, and that he would remove officers he suspected of wrong-doing from sensitive jobs. He said the SENAN had serious operational limitations, including a shortage of technicians and an operational staff of no more than 400. Gordon described several key initiatives he was undertaking, including combining the operations centers from the legacy air and naval services and collocating them with the intelligence center. He was also bringing back together the U.S. trained maintenance crews for the Operation Enduring Friendship Nortech boats. He expressed interest in having civilian/civilian U.S. Maritime Patrol Aircraft (read: U.S. Coast Guard and/or Customs and Border Protection aircraft) fly out of Panama for longer periods of time, to prevent drug traffickers from being able to work around the deployments. End Summary.

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Something is Rotten in the SMN  
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12. (S//NF) Rigoberto Gordon, named Director of the National Aero-Naval Service (SENAN) on December 22, told EMBOFFs December 5 that he was aware that some of the officers in the old National Maritime Service (SMN) were "dirty" and said he was "wary" of them. (Note: The SENAN was created by fusing together the SMN and the National Air Service (SAN) as part of a recent security reform (see reftel) Gordon was the Director of the SAN prior to being named Director of the SENAN. End Note) Gordon said he had caught one of his senior SMN officers lying to him about where one of his boats had been on his first day on the job. The boat had disappeared for 18 hours, and the crew did not have a coherent explanation as to what they had been doing. Gordon said he had a drug prosecutor on hand when the boat returned, and had an ion-scanned conducted to check for traces of drugs - with negative results. Asked what he would do about the officers

he did not trust, Gordon said he could not remove these people from the payroll because they did not have a record of disciplinary infractions, but that he would try to remove them from sensitive jobs, and perhaps even transfer them out of the SENAN. Gordon asserted that the problems he was finding indicated the SMN had been in much worse shape than he had expected. He said that, "Something is going on" in the ranks of former SMN officers, and that he would talk directly to President Torrijos about what he had found, and what the next steps should be.

13. (S//NF) Gordon said many boats were out of service for small defects that could be easily and cheaply repaired. He said he could not discount the possibility that the boats were being left un-repaired on purpose to subvert the SMN/SENAN's response capability. He noted, however, that the SENAN had very few technicians for its boats: five for the small go-fast boats, 40 for the larger boats, and all together only 12-13 who were truly qualified. He said the SENAN desperately needed to improve its ability to maintain its fleet. Gordon also asserted that the SMN had brought too many administrative staff into the merger, and was not a very "operational" organization. Gordon said that SENAN had a staff of 1,500, but that many were administrative staff and political place-holders, leaving him with an operational staff of approximately 400.

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A Problem Solver  
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14. (S//NF) Gordon said that he had already given orders for the SAN and SMN operations centers to be combined in the new SENAN headquarters in the former SMN headquarters located at Cocoli Base, the former U.S. MARFORSOUTH HQ, and adjacent to former USN Station Rodman. He said he has also ordered that the intelligence section to be co-located with the new unified operations center. He said he was now working to have the teams that were trained in the U.S. to maintain the Nortech boats of Operation Enduring Friendship brought back together and put in charge of maintaining the Nortechs again. (Note: These teams had been dispersed throughout the SMN, leading to a deterioration of the Nortech boats. End Note) Discussing the perennial SMN complaint that they do not have communications capabilities, Gordon said he was in favor of solving this by acquiring and distributing satellite phones. Gordon expressed interest in any training opportunities that might arise for his men, noting that improving the professional capabilities of the SENAN is key to rebuilding the service.

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Expanded MPA?  
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15. (S//NF) Gordon asked that the deployment of U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA) be expanded to cover longer periods of time. Gordon asserted that drug traffickers were able to plan their actions around the typical ten-day deployment cycles, and thus avoid detection. He said he would prefer to see the planes deployed to Panama for periods of 30 days at a time. On SENAN capabilities, Gordon said that all three of their Aviocars were working, and that one was being upgraded for night operations capability.

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The A Team  
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16. (S//NF) Asked who he would depend on to run the SENAN, Gordon named Major Jeremias Urieta, CDR Osvaldo Uena, CDR Jose de Jesus Rodriguez, and Commissioner Juan Vergara.

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Comment  
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17. (S//NF) Gordon's selection as the SENAN director is excellent news. As the former pilot for Panamanian President Torrijos, he has direct access to the President, and a reputation as a straight shooter. The day after he was named director of the SAN, he went public with how bad things were in the organization. His warnings were born out with the tragic crash of the SAN-100, though Gordon was almost forced to take political responsibility for that. He has now been given responsibility for an organization that three of the presidential candidates have sworn to disband if they win. The SENAN owes its existence to the highly controversial security reforms (see reftel) and that means the opposition's default position is that the merger of the SAN and the SMN should be reversed. As the Torrijos Administration draws to a close, and the May 3 general elections and July 1 inauguration near, Gordon has six months to prove that the creation of the SENAN was a good idea, regardless of how it came about, and that the new organization is worth saving. Post believes Gordon deserves full support as he tries to do this. While the SMN was a corrupt and operationally limited organization, the upside if Gordon can turn the SENAN around is tremendous. Panama's territorial waters on the Pacific and Caribbean sides are two of the most active drug trafficking routes in the region. USCG and CBP assets cannot cover them adequately, and U.S. Navy assets are not a viable option, given strong GOP objections on sovereignty grounds to deployment of any "military" assets on its territory or in its territorial waters to conduct operations. Gordon's moves to co-locate operations and intelligence has long been advocated by Post, and his personnel moves seem excellent. Post has an outstanding counter-narcotics relationship with Panama, and the SMN has always been the exception to the rule. If Gordon could put willing and competent officers and men in the right places, then USG cooperation could create a real deterrent force in Panama's territorial waters for the first time in years. Post will broach this subject with RADMs Brice-O'Hara, Nimmich and Lloyd during their visit to Panama on January 15. Among the ideas being considered to assist the SENAN are bringing a USCG cutter into Panamanian territorial waters to conduct counter-narcotics operations with the SENAN. Post would also like to know whether Gordon's suggestion that U.S. civilian MPA assets be deployed for longer periods of time in Panama is logistically and operationally feasible and/or desirable.

STEPHENSON